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Maintaining the meritocracy myth: A critical discourse analytic study of leaders' talk about merit and gender in academia

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Abstract

The belief in meritocracy – that advancement is based solely on individual capabilities and hard work – remains ingrained in organizations despite evidence it is a flawed concept that perpetuates gender and other social inequalities. Critical streams of research have highlighted the ideological character of meritocracy discourse, its entrenched nature and acceptance as 'common-sense'. Less is known about how this 'meritocracy myth' is maintained, that is, how this hegemonic discourse retains its potency in day-to-day talk in organizations. We argue that leaders, given their active discursive roles and opportunities to establish and control discourses, play an important but underexamined role in the reproduction and legitimization of this seemingly progressive yet ultimately destructive discourse. We conduct a critical discourse analysis (CDA) drawing on qualitative interviews with leaders in higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK focusing on their talk about women's recruitment and progression in academic roles. We identify three discursive interventions through which leaders routinely maintain and reinforce and on occasion challenge the existing system of meritocracy: *invisibilizing gender inequality through gender-neutrality*; *denying constraints through individualization*; and *problematising meritocracy to uphold or challenge the status quo*. We argue that by uncovering the means through which meritocracy discourse retains its resilience, our paper offers the opportunity to scrutinize and challenge these discursive underpinnings that uphold the 'meritocracy myth'. We suggest it is possible to re-imagine what might be considered 'merit worthy' in universities recognising and centring structural gender and other social inequalities to create more equal institutions.

Keywords

meritocracy, discourse, gender (in)equality, women's representation, academia

Introduction

Within organizations there remains a reliance on meritocracy as a system to inform decision

making in relation to recruitment, reward, and promotion (Castilla & Ranganathan, 2020), built

on the assumption that 'if we try hard enough, we can make it: that race or class or gender are

not, on a fundamental level, significant barriers to success', rather 'talent' combines with 'effort'

leading to a 'rise to the top' (Littler, 2017, p. 2). The system promises fairness, justice, and social

mobility. When outcomes of systems based on such principles are mapped, however, 'patterns of

disadvantage and exclusion' emerge (Morley & Lugg, 2009, p. 46). Rather than reducing gender

and other social inequalities, research has shown that reward systems that treat gender and other

markers of disadvantage as irrelevant to success are in fact a central means through which

inequality is maintained (van den Brink & Benschop, 2012b; Castilla & Benard, 2010). As we

illustrate in this paper, the existing system, which we label 'the meritocracy' to distinguish it

from other potential ways of defining or understanding what is 'merit worthy', is a key means

through which contemporary neoliberalist agendas are enacted, where the language of equal

opportunity and fairness is used to uphold a 'socially corrosive ethic of competitive self-interest

which both legitimates inequality and damages community by requiring people to be in constant

competition with each other' (Littler, 2017, p.3).

The resilience of the 'meritocracy myth' has resulted in researchers identifying it as a

hegemonic discourse: a ubiquitous, uncontested, seemingly natural, or 'common-sense' account

that is resilient to countervailing evidence (Krefting, 2003; Śliwa & Johansson, 2014). We know

much less about how it functions to reproduce gender inequalities in day-to-day talk within

organizations and how and why it remains so resilient (Hardy & Thomas, 2014). More

specifically, we lack understanding about how those in positions of power, i.e. those in subject

positions that afford them more opportunity to influence, control, and (re)produce texts (Phillips,

Sewell, & Jaynes, 2008) use, enact, and legitimize discourses of meritocracy. We focus

specifically on the talk of leaders in UK higher education institutions (HEIs) in relation to

women academics' recruitment and progression. There remains an enduring belief that

universities are 'true meritocracies' (Scully, 1997). However, what constitutes 'academic

excellence' has been shown to be deeply gendered, conferred in ways that disadvantage women

academics where the 'the arbiters of excellence' are largely men (Brink & Benschop, 2012a;

Husu & Koskinen, 2010). Within universities women are largely found in the more junior and

insecure academic positions with the proportion of women professors hovering around 28% in

the UK (HESA, 2021). In the most elite universities this gender disparity is even more

pronounced (Fotaki, 2013). Contrary to the narrative of universities as great equalisers, they are

centres where neoliberal ideals are propagated and longstanding gender, racial, and class-based

inequalities are perpetuated and reinforced (Guinier, 2015).

We examine how, in the face of evidence demonstrating that women do not progress in

academic careers with the same degree of success as white men, leaders maintain the

'meritocracy myth'. More specifically, we examine the ways in which the denial or obscuring of

gender (dis)advantage through talk of meritocracy occurs. We conduct 53 qualitative interviews

with leaders in HEIs, treating the interviews as co-produced interactional discursive events

(Alvesson, 2003) and employ a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA; Fairclough, 1992) to examine

leaders' discursive strategies that 'naturalize the social order, and especially relations of [gender]

inequality' (van Dijk, 1993, p.254). We identify three discursive means through which men and

women leaders routinely maintain, reinforce or on occasion challenge the meritocracy:

invisibilizing gender inequality through gender-neutrality; *denying constraints through*

individualization; *problematising meritocracy to uphold or challenge the status quo*. Our findings show how leaders render invisible gender inequality by presenting the recruitment and promotion processes in academia as gender neutral thereby reproducing systems of gender inequity in more hidden and covert ways. Lack of representation of women at senior levels in universities was not presented as a failure of the meritocracy, rather leaders used discourses of individualization to explain gender imbalance, discounting wider structural constraints. While leaders consistently 'naturalised' (van Leeuwen, 2007) the meritocracy as the best (only) system, some leaders highlighted the flaws inherent in the existing system. Rather than act as a counterchallenge, leaders' problematising of the meritocracy largely focused on how they 'fixed' the system, referring to instances where they acted in an informal capacity to restore fairness, displacing the need for a more systemic change. There was, however, a very small minority of leaders that problematized the meritocracy in a bid to challenge the existing system and pursue more systemic change.

Through revealing three discursive interventions we show how leader's talk obscures and denies gender inequality, presenting women as solely accountable for their own under-representation in more senior roles and rendering changes to the existing system unnecessary. We highlight how leaders themselves are positioned within and conditioned by the neoliberal meritocracy and seek to maintain their 'earned status' which is based upon the continuing growth of their institutions' competitive advantage and revenue. By uncovering the means through which meritocracy discourse retains its resilience, our paper offers the opportunity to scrutinize and more effectively challenge the talk that underpins the upholding of the 'meritocracy myth'. While in the existing meritocracy what is considered meritorious is embedded in ideas of individualism, self-interest, and competition (Littler, 2017), we suggest it is possible to re-

imagine how merit might be defined in universities. Meritocracy is at its most fundamental a

social system that rewards individuals based on merit, but merit is not an 'objective' or 'neutral'

term but rather a socially constructed and malleable concept. What is considered 'merit worthy'

can change over time depending on what a society or institution values (Guinier, 2015).

Although existing conceptualisations and measures of what constitutes merit reflect the deeply

gendered relations within which they exist, standards of merit could be transformed to be more

inclusive and reflect different and diverse values. This would involve recognising that gender

and other categories of disadvantage are not irrelevant to merit, on the contrary, in order to create

fairer systems, it is critical to recognise and foreground systematic and structural inequalities. In

doing so we can better understand how to change the reward systems of our institutions, moving

away from competitive and financial incentives and toward the creation of faculties and

departments that represent more fully the diverse society that universities purport to serve.

Theoretical Background

Gender and the meritocracy myth

Within the meritocracy, it is assumed that individuals of equivalent talent and motivation will

advance at similar rates and where inequalities emerge, they can be accounted for by deficiencies

in human capital, such as a lack of experience, or motivational deficiencies, such as confidence

or preferences for family over work (Foley & Williamson, 2019). This system is widely accepted

as the most equitable approach to 'sorting people into positions and distributing rewards' (Scully,

1997, p. 413). However, research has extensively illustrated the innate gender biases that

accompany decision-making within the existing system of meritocracy. In an experimental study

Uhlmann and Cohen (2005) show how individuals define criteria for success in job roles based

on the credentials that a candidate of the desired (stereotypical) gender happens to have, so for a 'male' role such as police chief, participants defined their criteria of merit to align with the credentials of individual male applicants. Such gender-based ascription biases work to disadvantage women seeking managerial and leadership roles since such positions have been traditionally dominated by men and are associated with 'masculine' characteristics (Reskin & McBriar, 2000). Even when efforts are made to hide gender related information in applications, bias still occurs as managers search for implicit cues to infer applicants' gender (Foley & Williamson, 2019). Where organizations try to actively promote a meritocratic culture, gender bias may be even greater – this 'paradox of meritocracy' occurs as employees believe that because their organization identifies as meritocratic, they themselves are non-prejudiced, making them less likely to scrutinise their behaviour and potential bias (Castilla & Benard, 2010).

Those who are systematically disadvantaged by this system can be just as likely to believe in the meritocracy and reject the idea of discrimination (Baker & Kelan, 2019). McCoy and Major (2007) show that women primed with meritocratic beliefs are more likely to blame themselves and other women in ways that justify their low status. Reinforcing this, initiatives to address gender inequalities within organizations are often based around attempts to 'fix women' for example women's mentorship or confidence and skills-based training programs. As Acker (1990, p.142) notes 'since men in organizations take their behavior and perspectives to represent the human, organizational structures and processes are theorized as gender neutral,' this obscures unequal gender relations and instead women are identified as 'missing something (skills, confidence, commitment, networks, vision) and should work harder at acquiring it…when these efforts do not deliver…women are not "stepping up"' (Wittenberg-Cox, 2013, p. 107).

When women don't 'step up' (i.e. do not progress in their career) or 'opt out' (Williams, Manvell, & Bornstein, 2006) it is assumed that they are unwilling to prioritise work and careers while raising a family (Hewlett & Luce, 2005). This 'work family narrative' dominates debates about women's careers and acts as a justification and legitimation of women's lack of progression within organizations (Padavic, Ely, & Reid, 2020). Efforts to mitigate this by offering flexible working arrangements may result in the further disadvantaging of women as they become victims of the 'flexibility stigma' where they are perceived as less productive and committed than men (Williams, Blair-Low, & Berdahl, 2013). Efforts and initiatives that seek to enable individual women to achieve greater success can hinder women's collective progression as a social group by leaving 'women with the problem and men with the advantage' (Eveline, 1998, p.92), reproducing masculine models of merit, valorising hegemonic masculine traits and behaviours, and embodying and reproducing patterns of male power and domination (Galea & Chappell, 2022).

Critical streams of research have sought to problematize the entrenched nature of the meritocracy and acceptance as 'common-sense', interrogating the enduring belief that such systems are fair despite extensive countervailing evidence (Sandel, 2020). Littler (2017) unpicks the 'immutable' and 'factual' status of this 'ideologically charged' discourse, by illustrating meritocracy's 'short etymological history – under 60 years' where the meaning of the term has moved 'from a negative disparaging criticism…of problematic new hierarchies…to a positive celebratory term, one connecting competitive individualism and talent' (p. 43). In Young's (1958) satire 'The Rise of Meritocracy 1870-2033' it is a pejorative term, a dystopian future where elites gleaned their social position based on a formulation of merit as 'IQ + effort'. With the advent of neoliberalism, the term was progressively rehabilitated, alongside the promotion of

competitive market-based self-interest where success and failure were individualized. As opposed to older systems of privilege, e.g., born into wealth or aristocracy, where 'built-in' privilege was overtly acknowledged, in the meritocracy privilege is hidden. In the context of gender, meritocracy discourse persuades women they do not 'merit' the successes that are denied to them by working to obfuscate structural and organizational factors that disproportionately impact women, such as 'overwork culture, the inflexibility of institutionalized labor, inadequately funded and socialized childcare' (Littler, 2017, p. 201; Lewis, 2018).

The 'meritocracy myth', a seemingly progressive yet ultimately destructive discourse, acts as a smokescreen for continued gender inequality by disregarding entrenched discriminatory practices and deep-rooted gender-based biases and assumptions. It is one of the most 'prevalent social and cultural tropes of our time' (Littler, 2017, p.9), yet we know much less about how this discourse is used in everyday talk in organizations and how it remains so resilient (Hardy & Thomas, 2014). While there has been some research on how women submit to and subscribe to meritocracy discourse (Śliwa & Johansson, 2014), what remains particularly underexplored is how those in power use talk of meritocracy to maintain the status quo. Leaders' subject positions, i.e. their 'location in social space from which [they] produce texts' (Phillips et al., 2008, p. 772) results in them having a strong 'discourse access profile' (van Dijk, 1993). Leaders are more likely to be able shape, control, legitimize and potentially transform organizational discourses (van Dijk, 1993). We focus specifically on the discursive activities of leaders in HEIs in relation to women academics' recruitment and progression. As we outline below, commitment to the meritocracy is central to the academe's mission and the belief that merit can be judged objectively is a core principle of university practice despite extensive research problematizing these assumptions (Treviño, Balkin, & Gomez-Mejia, 2017; van den Brink et al., 2010). We thus

argue that HEIs are an ideal context for our study.

Meritocracy, Discourse and Gender in Higher Education Institutions

Universities typically consider themselves to be meritocracies and even faculty who 'study the

ways that politics, family wealth, and social biases compromise the meritocratic operation of

other domains…uphold the university as the true meritocracy' (Scully, 1997, p. 399). Existing

privileges and advantages are discounted as irrelevant and rarely acknowledged as contributing

factors in terms of success (Guinier, 2015). In terms of gender, universities do not offer better

career outcomes for women: as in other organizational contexts women disproportionately

occupy junior academic roles, with men greatly outnumbering women in professorial roles which

are normally a pre-requisite for more senior leadership roles (Bagilhole & White, 2011; Jarboe,

2018). As neoliberal governance models have crept into HEIs, and academia has become

increasingly corporatized, marketized, and audited, research has become a competitive game of

recognition, prestige, and power, 'a 'manstory' relying on a hero myth that glorifies individual

achievements and success' (Ylijoki, 2013, p. 249). Performance is evaluated according to

quantifiable standards of productivity using the purported 'objective' metric of 'academic

excellence' (Guinier, 2015; Scully, 2002). These trends are at their most extreme in many of the

most elite universities where the underrepresentation of women in senior academic research

positions is most pronounced (Fotaki, 2013).

Research has increasingly debunked the assertion that the 'evasive social construct' of

'academic excellence' represents a gender-neutral standard of merit (van den Brink et al., 2010).

van den Brink and Benschop (2012a) unpack how gender inequality is veiled in professorial

appointments by conferring 'academic excellence' in ways that disadvantage women including

basing it on a linear career trajectory with a lengthy publication record, the presence of strong

international network connections, and visiting fellowships often at overseas institutions. Husu

and Koskinen (2010) demonstrate 'the arbiters of excellence' are largely men, e.g. the editors of

top journal and decision-makers of the most significant prizes and awards. While universities

point to their raft of gender equity policies such as parental leave and flexible working

arrangements, such policies 'are routinely undermined by the audit culture that works on a merit

system that is conceptualized as gender-neutral but is essentially masculinist' (Huppatz, Sang, &

Napier, 2019, p. 785). If women take advantage of these policies, they ultimately reduce their

quantifiable outputs (publications) which has a knock-on impact on opportunities to obtain

grants, permanent academic positions, and promotion. Academic systems are built on masculine

norms, where individuals must have complete commitment to their career largely unencumbered

by domestic and care demands since presumably others (women) will manage the household

responsibilities and care work). Women academics often end up channelled away from elite

masculinised research routes and towards less prestigious feminized teaching, administrative,

and pastoral roles (Ashencaen Crabtree & Schiel, 2019.

Yet despite this underrepresentation of women in more prestigious and senior roles and

evidence that unpicks 'the objectivity and measurement of excellence' (van den Brink &

Benschop, 2012a, p. 508) there remains an enduring belief that HEIs are 'the last remaining

realms of merit' (Lewis, 2018, p. xi). Meritocracy discourse remains so pervasive in the academe

that 'efforts to revise merit-based evaluation processes meet considerable resistance, even from

those who might benefit from change' (Krefting, 2003, p.261). As Fotaki (2013) illustrates,

rather than leading to a rejection of the universal masculine order of academia, the ongoing

exclusion and devaluation of women results in women academics adopting masculine subject

positions, colluding in their own marginalization, and leaving uncontested the power structures in place. Śliwa and Johansson (2014) illustrate how foreign women academics reproduce the mainstream discourse of meritocracy, often accounting for their progression (or lack thereof) based on individualist responsibility. In this study we build on this discursive interrogation of the meritocracy and gender inequality, using a CDA approach (Fairclough, 1992) to examine the talk of HEI leaders about women's recruitment and progression within academia.

Methodology

Participants

The study is based on 53 qualitative interviews, consisting of 32 women and 21 men, holding senior leadership roles in Russell Group universities. The Russell Group is a collection of 24 UK universities with a shared focus on research and a reputation for academic achievement (The Russell Group of Universities, 2022). While the group highlights a commitment to equality and social mobility, they have also been identified as sites of enduring inequity and lack of diversity (Boliver, 2013). Gender imbalances in senior roles are widespread within these universities, with women making up just over a third of senior lecturers and 22.7% of professors, in comparison to 28% for HEIs more generally in the UK (HESA, 2021).

We used a purposeful sampling strategy (Patton, 2001) supplemented by snowball sampling (Parker, Scott, & Geddes, 2019) to identify university leaders with a strong 'discourse access profile' (van Dijk, 1993). As van Dijk (1993, p. 256) notes, organizational leaders have 'special access to discourse' controlling and influencing 'discourse genres, context, participants, audience, scope and text characteristics'. University leaders have access to board meetings, control agendas and topics, chair meetings (where they control turn-taking and opportunities to

speak), write university mission statements, including gender and equality strategy, and therefore

have ample discursive opportunities to shape, embed or challenge inequalities. We aimed to have

a sample that represented leadership at different levels within universities. We initially directed

interview requests to Vice Chancellors and Deputy-Vice Chancellors at the 24 Russell Group

Universities. We also sought to interview those who had roles on the executive management

team, including the University Secretary, Chief Financial Officer, and Director of Human

Resources (labelled 'executive team' in Table 1). To get insight at school or faculty level we

invited several Deans/Deputy Deans to be interviewed. We also asked individuals with

leadership roles related to equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) to participate. Where these

roles were held by academics, we label them under their primary role title (Professor) and when

their role focused exclusively on EDI we labelled them 'EDI Strategy' (Table 1). Four senior

corporate-sector leaders (one CEO and three partners in FTSE top 100 firms, labelled 'corporate

leader') were also included as members of the university governing body. Ninety-one requests

for participation were sent (41 women and 50 men). All those who agreed to participate (53)

were interviewed. Our final sample had more women than men (32 women, 21 men). Although

those who said they could not participate reported this as due to scheduling conflicts, women are

more likely to be interested in the impact of gender at work and to do EDI roles (Jarboe, 2018),

and perhaps therefore more likely to respond positively to a request for interview.

INSERT TABLE 1 AROUND HERE

Qualitative interviews

The interviews were carried out by the one of the authors and ranged from 32 minutes to 2.5

hours with an average length of 64.5 minutes. The interviews took place in a location convenient

to participants, either a personal office or campus meeting space. Consent to participate and

record was obtained prior to each interview. We approached the interview as a co-produced

interactional exchange where meaning is 'actively and communicatively assembled…by both the

interviewee and interviewer' (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 4). Our approach can be viewed as

in contrast with 'neo-positive' perspectives on the interview, where a 'neutral' researcher elicits

information from 'primarily competent and moral truth tellers…serving up data that will reveal

their 'interiors' or the realities of their social institutions' (Alvesson & Ashcraft, 2012, p. 245).

We are not focused on accessing a participant's inner mental universe, rather we treat responses

as accounts by focusing on the social outcomes that participants seek to achieve with their

language (Alvesson, 2003). The emphasis is on the regularity that exists in the discursive

elements used by speakers to maintain, rationalise, and naturalise the current status quo (Potter &

Wetherell, 1987).

We take a loosely semi-structured approach in terms of interview questions. Given their

position as organizational elites the participants held significant power in terms of length and

direction of the interview (Conti & O'Neill, 2007). The interviewer started by requesting the

interviewee explain their current role and career history. In a conversational and organic manner,

the interviewer then solicited discourse about personal experiences of gender at work, and wider

issues of gender imbalances in academia and how this might be addressed. The discussions

relating to merit and meritocracy typically emerged from the participants themselves, reflecting

the ubiquity of this concept in recruitment and progression. While the interviewer did not

elaborate her own views, participants were aware that the researcher was interested in gender and

equality in HEIs. We acknowledge the discursive context within which the responses were

produced, working on the assumption that responses 'would be both occasioned (produced for

the particular context of the interview) and yet also revealing of the collectively shared

discursive constructions of gender and equality' (Edley, 2001, p. 442). All interviews were

transcribed verbatim using a modified version of the Jefferson (1984) system routinely used in

discourse-oriented studies where interactionally relevant details are transcribed (Appendix A),

producing transcripts that 'look to the eye how it sounds to the ear' (Schenkein, 1978, p. xi).

Analytical Procedure – Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) focuses on the role of discourse in the production and

reproduction of power and inequality, advocating that unequal power relations, bias, and

privilege are (re)produced and maintained through discursive activity (Fairclough, 1992; van

Dijk, 1993). CDA advocates more attention should be directed to 'top-down relations of

dominance' rather than 'bottom-up relations of resistance, compliance and acceptance' (van

Dijk, 1993, p. 250; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). While the focus of CDA is on the discourse of

those with more power, it does not assume that inequality is simply imposed on others, but rather

that subjugated groups can come to see their position as natural or legitimate through the

discursive production of hegemonic masculinities, regulations, norms, and cultures that reinforce

unequal relations (van Dijk, 1993; Wodak, 1997). CDA proposes that understanding how those

in more powerful positions use discourses to enact, condone, and legitimate social inequality is

key to understanding how these discourses may be challenged and potentially transformed.

Methodologically, CDA aims to link 'the micro scale of everyday language use and the

macro scale of social structure, [treating] language use as a form of social practice – discourse is

shaped and constrained by social structures, where discursive practice will simultaneously shape

the social structures that constrain it' (Phillips et al., 2008, p. 2). CDA focuses on different levels

in its analysis of discourse: the description of the text (micro-linguistic analysis), the analysis of

discursive practice (intermediate analytical level) and explaining social structures (macro-

analytical level; Fairclough, 1992; Wodak, 1997). The three levels are interdependent, and their

relationship is symbiotic so while the analysis of each level is described separately below, the

analysis process was highly iterative, with each stage informing the next, and a constant back

and forth to produce the 'final' product. Table 2 organises and summarizes our analytical process

which we discuss in depth below.

INSERT TABLE 2 AROUND HERE

To develop more familiarity with the data and identify areas that could be important for

further analysis we started with initial coding by identifying words or phrases to thematically

organize portions of text. Having already done a thorough review of the work in this area we

approached the data with existing literature in mind, coding with both in vivo codes from

participants' discourse and concepts from the academic literature, e.g. women opt-out, work-

family narratives, equality interventions. We also paid attention to idiosyncrasies,

commonalities, and differences across the texts (Strauss, 1987).

We then moved to the CDA analysis. We initially conducted a close textual analysis to

describe the properties of the discourse focusing on aspects such as lexicalization (e.g. the

selection/choice of wording; use of metaphor; use of active/passive voice; deletion of agent; who

is quoted directly and indirectly; and nominalization (turning a process into a reified thing or

event) (adapted from Janks, 1997; see Table 2). The next iterative stage involved an analysis of

the discursive practices in the data which included a consideration of the roles that individuals

adopted during their construction of a discourse and the conditions within which it was

produced. The objective was to understand and interpret the relationship between the discourse

and its producers by identifying 'subject positions', 'social identities', 'social relationships'

(Fairclough, 1992). We took note of what assumptions were taken for granted as commonly held;

what relationships were set up and enacted; and how and why participants orientated themselves

in particular ways (Drew & Heritage, 1992). The final stage was positioning the discourse within

the larger societal context with a focus on the hegemonic functions of discourse and how

ideological constructions contribute to the production, reproduction, and transformation of

unequal power relations (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). We examined what power relations at the

situational, institutional, and societal level shaped the discourse, whether the discourse evoked

certain ideologies; what assumptions about social relationships, social identities, and power

relations permeated the discourse (see Table 3 for a worked example of our analysis process).

INSERT TABLE 3 AROUND HERE

Through our iterative analysis we identified three core means through which the

discourse of meritocracy was enacted and legitimised by leaders of HEIs. We did not find

consistent patterns of gendered differences with women just as likely as men to enact discourses

of meritocracy. The data extracts are presented followed by participant' pseudonyms, gender (W

for woman or M for man) and role in the university.

Findings

Invisibilizing gender inequality through gender-neutrality

Throughout their accounts, participants presented the existing system of meritocracy in a 'matter of fact' way as a 'natural' part of the social order where the best individuals are recruited or promoted. A core means through which participants naturalised merit (van Leeuwen, 2007) was through presenting decision-making as gender-neutral, discursively working to render gender irrelevant, concealing gender inequality (Acker, 2006; Kelan, 2009). Both men and women evoked the gender neutral *'best person'* logic while women often drew on personal experience accounts to discount the significance of gender in their own progression.

1	*Interviewer*	*When you're appointing (.) and these decisions are being made about who to employ, how are those decisions made?*
	Louise, W, Deputy Vice Chancellor (DVC)	that's a very big question (.) but again I think the point is to try to look at the balance of your skillset and the balance of your gender and I think it's important you get quite a good mix of backgrounds and subjects and so diversity isn't just a gender thing. It's a much more general thing than that (.) And I think that the issue is, it is a meritocracy in a way, you are trying to get the best person. We hopefully have a diverse shortlist as well and then may the best person win (.) Whomever they may be.

In the above extract, the interviewer asks about recruitment decisions, the participant initially hedges her response 'that's a very big question', then deemphasizes the centrality of gender noting, 'diversity isn't just a gender thing', once the list of candidates is diverse, the meritocracy will naturally prevail, and the 'best person' will 'win'. In extract 2, in a series of stalling, stop-start sentences, the participant outlines that because he believes 'completely in meritocracy' he 'struggles' to 'see' the 'issue' before more firmly drawing on the *'best person'* logic.

| 2 | Henry, M, Dean | I find it difficult (.) because I believe completely in meritocracy (.) if I think you are better than the bloke it wouldn't cross my mind not to recruit someone who's a woman so I suppose I struggle a bit to see it because I don't see the (.) I don't see the issue (.) I would want the best person alongside me irrespective of race, gender, ethnicity because I know that the stronger the people I put around me the better I will be |

There is no interrogation in these extracts of the assumptions underlying who is thought of as the

'best person' or in extract 2 what 'stronger' (a highly masculinised term in itself) or 'better'

means and as a result the privilege that is being upheld here goes unquestioned. Leaders'

accounts were littered with claims that the 'best person wins', which is a cornerstone of the

neoliberal meritocracy since resulting inequalities can be justified on the basis that participants

had equal opportunity to prove themselves (Sandel, 2020). In the context of increasingly

corporate universities, where every activity, output and impact is assessed, these leaders are

pressured to ensure accountability and 'value for money', thus the gender neutral 'best person'

ideal leads to the recruitment of the most 'productive' individuals in terms of quantifiable

outputs (high status papers, research grants, etc.) who are more likely to be men. Women leaders

also presented gender as irrelevant to their personal progression:

3	*Interviewer*	*You've done quite well. What do you think you can kind of attribute that to?*
	Barbara, W, Dean	I don't know really (.) I mean I (.) never been bothered about being the only woman I just cracked on (.) I worked in a really male environment, so I've always just (.) you know (.) it's a meritocracy (.) I just work really hard…

In extract 3, we see that Barbara constructs an account where her success is due to her 'cracking

on' and 'working hard'. This is what Littler (2017) refers to as a 'parable of progress', narratives

about those who have 'made it' despite being members of disadvantaged social groups. These

narratives work to showcase what can happen when you 'rise up' whilst detracting from others

who fail to do the same. They are central to how the meritocracy maintains its power, feeding

into the belief that through hard work anyone can 'make it' up the metaphorical 'ladder of

opportunity'. When women leaders did give accounts of difficult experiences or encounters at

work, they presented these incidences as unconnected to gender:

| 4 | Claire, W, Vice Chancellor (VC) | …maybe (.) nobody believes it but there's very few occasions in my career where I think (.2) being a woman has held me back and I actually have to think re::ally hard to think about real examples (.) I've had episodes where people have <u>bull</u>ied me and everything else like a lo::t of people have when they get to a life in academia (.) but I don't re::ally think that any of them were because I was a woman. |

In extract 4, Claire starts with the caveat that 'maybe nobody believes' that her gender has not 'held [her] back', with the underlying assertion that there is a widely accepted (incorrect) assumption that gender impedes women at work. She acknowledges that she's experienced episodes of bullying but immediately follows up with 'like a lot of *people* when they *get to a life in academia*' making the experience of bullying in academia gender neutral. What this talk conceals is that bullying is not neutral - there is always a power imbalance between the parties and given women are more often less senior, untenured, part-time etc. they are more likely to experience bullying than men (Johnson-Bailey, 2015). Similarly, when women leaders felt they 'don't fit in' or were excluded they were unlikely to attribute this to gender:

| 5 | *Interviewer* | *Do you feel the effects of that (.) as::a woman in a male dominated field?* |
| | Barbara, W, Dean | So I:: don't know whether people see me as doing things because I'm a <u>wo</u>man <u>or</u> doing things because I'm from a different background (.) I feel I don't fit in (.) So I don't feel as excluded as much because I'm female (.3) I feel excluded as a result of my > educational background and class < |

Barbara questions whether others attribute her way of 'doing things' to being a woman or because she's from a 'different background', but largely identifies educational background and class rather than gender as her marker for exclusion. However, focusing on 'one category almost inevitably obscures and oversimplifies other interpenetrating realities' (Acker, 2006 p. 442) and as scholars of intersectionality show, it is hard to separate out characteristics when it comes to (dis)advantage or bias. Despite's Barbara's earlier assertion that success comes through 'hard work' (extract 3), her account here is inconsistent with her previous defense of the university as

meritocratic. Whilst she argues her exclusion is not gender based but rather based on another

social category (class), she is conceding that in the existing meritocracy, people are

disadvantaged (and advantaged) by their membership of certain social groups. In extract 6,

Fatimah uses her experience as a Black woman to reinforce the meritocracy as the best system

(as opposed to positive discrimination), since without it her individual deservedness (and that of

other Black men and women) would be questioned:

6	Fatimah W, Exec Team	we have to make a conscious effort (.) without going into quotas and positive discrimination because (.5) for people of colour (.6) that's a double whammy < they say oh you're here as a non-white women >
	Interviewer	*People have said that to you?*
	Fatimah	I've had this from strangers (.) I was at an event one dude comes up to me and says 'oh you already have a board position' I'm thinking ya (.) [eyebrow raise] and then he said 'I'll never get that. You see I'm male pale and stale' (.) and before I could even respond he said well I'm [name] in PR and if you see something interesting please call me (.6) I'm thinking f**k you too (.) it's not the first time since then it has happened a lot of time with men who when I check they haven't even got a single degree (.) I have two degrees I'm far more qualified I'm far more skilled (.) but what do they see? the skin the gender and the race

Whilst this participant initially outlines the importance of making 'a conscious effort' for more

equal outcomes, she doesn't specify what kinds of conscious efforts should be made beyond that

these efforts *should not* involve quotas or positive discrimination. She presents such initiatives

unhelpful and creating a 'double whammy' for those in traditionally marginalised groups. She

argues such initiatives denigrate individual deservedness as others would assume those who are

successful from disadvantaged groups have achieved not on 'merit' but due to 'the skin, the

gender and the race'. The counter to this is that those in privileged social categories are already

disproportionately achieving because of their skin, gender, and race yet their individual merit

goes unquestioned.

Denying constraints through individualization

In participant's accounts the challenges that universities face in terms of promotion of women academics at senior levels were often acknowledged by leaders, but this was not presented as a failure of the meritocracy. Through a process of individualization leaders challenged the perspective that women's underrepresentation is symbolic of inequality, denying or discursively downplaying institutional and structural barriers and constraints.

7	Jim, M, Exec Team	We lost <u>so</u> many people because (.) they decided they were going to be - look after kids or whatever, of those who stay the course (.) are they underrepresented would be my first question?

In extract 7, the participant acknowledges that they 'lost so many *people*' because they 'decided' i.e., voluntarily chose, to 'look after kids or whatever'. He identifies this 'lost' group using the non-gendered 'people' rather than 'women' and then questions whether 'they' [women] are really underrepresented if we focus solely on those 'who stay the course'. In the meritocracy it is assumed that everyone starts off with an equal chance to 'make it' and inequalities in outcomes are to be expected because not everyone will have the same perseverance and talent. Jim's account silences the fact that those who are 'lost' to family obligations, unable to cope with the increasing pressure and workloads of academia whilst taking on the main caring role in the family are more often women whilst those who have 'stayed the course' are more often men (Padavic et al., 2020). There is also no consideration of why these 'lost' academics had to give up their careers to 'look after kids' or why having children cannot be compatible with having a successful academic career. In extract 8, the interviewer presents a challenge to the interviewee to consider that men also make the choice to have a family:

8	*Interviewer*	*Talking about maternity and returning then (.) it's only women that make that choice, to have children?*
	Alex, M, DVC	I suppose I would say you're making choices in your life all the time (.) and if you're making the choice about having kids then there's going to be

consequences to that choice (.) that would be presumably something you'd discuss with your other half before you go (.) well you'd <u>hope</u> before you go into it and acknowledging that there's going to be certain changes and how do we (.) as a family accommodate those changes, who's best I mean, most of the sort of super women talk about 'oh it was always gonna be me (.) I was the breadwinner so husband's gonna stay at home' and I suppose it's no different than the men saying 'well I'm the breadwinner so my wife is gonna stay'…I suspect there are very few situations where the person who's earning more…or significantly more - stays at home following the birth of children…it really depends if you're earning 60 he's earning 50 you know but if you're earning 600 and he's earning 50 (.) don't think there's going to be a discussion … how many mothers who are no longer working are thinking oh (.) 'I was done out of the opportunity (.) by my husband or by his six figures'…I think part of it at the same time is it's very difficult to have it all.

Despite referring to women breadwinners as 'super women' thereby denoting them as part of an extraordinary group, he presents the decision about 'who is best' to stay home after children as unrelated to gender rather it's a simple, objective 'choice' based on finances. As his argument progresses, he uses an extreme example, women with husbands earning six figure salaries, suggesting it is unlikely they feel 'done out of the opportunity'. There is no consideration of what 'best' means in the context of taking care of children or questioning why there should be a sole breadwinner rather than responsibilities shared between partners, with organizational support. The account silences the potential additional barriers or societal expectations that women confront when seeking to return to work. He completes the argument by reciting an adage used typically in relation to women and their careers 'it's very difficult to have it all' - 'all' meaning it's difficult for women [but not men] to have both a successful career and children. In extract 9, Russell tries to reduce the culpability of academic institutions in the lack of representations of women in more senior roles by drawing on expert authority to aid in the presentation of his account as factual rather than opinion (van Leeuwen, 2007).

9	Russell, M, DVC	I read some stuff by both McKinsey and in the Harvard Business Review a few years ago that <u>actually</u> (.) perhaps the most difficult

thing to adjust for are the choices and expectations of women themselves (.) and my worry is that quite often women may try to adopt what may be seen as male behaviours not natural to them in order to try and progress and (.) of course if that's the case you can't re::ally be an authentic leader and > you can't persuade other people to do things <

He suggests for institutions it is difficult to have policies that improve representation because it is challenging to factor in the individual 'choices and expectations' of women, he then quickly moves to draw on an essentialized conception of the behaviour of men and women attributing women's lack of visibility and success in leadership roles to their adoption of 'male behaviours not natural to them', meaning they are not perceived as 'authentic leader[s]'. This participant doesn't question why women academics feel they need to adopt masculinized behaviours to 'try and progress' but what he is illustrating is that there is a dominant way of doing leadership and that classic leadership styles are not gender neutral. In corporate university contexts, 'leadership' remains associated with stereotypically masculine traits and dispositions with leaders often being selected from the male dominated, more prestigious, 'hard' sciences. Leaders also used meritocracy discourse to reject affirmative action or positive discrimination initiatives as a legitimate means to recruit and/or promote women.

| 10 | Interviewer | *so do you think (.) the initiatives that have been started (.) Athena Swan, targets (.) do you think those things are helping?* |
| | Brian, M, Exec Team | The::y're helping for sure (.5) I'm nervous about quotas because I'm HUGELY meritocratic (.) if you go back in time the profession was entirely unmeritocratic (.) I hated that system and I fought through my life to change it completely so we were completely enough meritocratic (.) you were paid according to your value (.) so I would hate to have a system that forces us into a position where we recruit people who are not as good as the people we could receive because there's a quota (.7) Anything that helps towards building confidence building the capability < helping them (.) them that sounds awful doesn't it (.) women (.) helping women (.) somehow acquire the skills to go into managerial positions I would support whole heartedly |

In extract 10, the participant agrees that voluntary initiatives like Athena Swan (a gender equality accreditation system in UK HEIs), are helping (without specifying how they help), then quickly contrasts such voluntary measures to mandatory quotas which he is 'nervous' about because they would force the recruitment 'of people who are not as good'. The (gendered) assumptions in terms of what is considered 'good' are not explored nor does he elaborate how he decides an individual's 'value'. Quotas are positioned in opposition to meritocracy, threatening to return us to an unspecified period in the past that was 'entirely unmeritocratic'. This participant notes he 'fought' against the prior system and although he doesn't elaborate what exactly the system was, presumably, he is suggesting that recruitment/promotion was not solely based on individual talent and hard work. Comparing meritocracy positively against past 'unmeritocratic' systems of privilege (e.g. hereditary privileges, nepotism) is another means through which the meritocracy is reproduced and maintained (Littler, 2017). However, the meritocracy does not appear to offer much better outcomes for those in disadvantaged groups, rather privileges are preserved and reproduced whilst being largely concealed. Leaders also presented issues of gender discrimination and harassment in university contexts as individualized, localised episodes:

11	*Interviewer*	*Are there not (.) do you find there's things women (.) I suppose <u>have</u> to deal with at work that men don't*
	Luke, M, Deputy Dean	sexual harassment wise (.) I'd be almost entirely conditioned by my wife (.) who'd say just knee him in the so and so or just you know (.3) she would have the sort of (.) you know > just react to it and deal with it > and I suppose part of that is then sort of becomes my (.) you know thinking about that's what women should be doing.

Luke draws on the 'voice' of his wife to ascribe women the agency to confront such issues on a personal basis, trivializing the issue of sexual harassment. Despite universities claiming to be occupational centres of equality, incidents of sexual harassment against women are common, however, the implication in extract 11 is that individual women rather than institutions are

responsible for finding solutions. Acknowledging sexual harassment or other gender-based

disadvantage as systemic, can impact the marketability of a HEI, therefore it must be 'swept

under the carpet…airbrushed out of the picture, to ensure the security of income streams: from

research, from student recruitment or both' (Phipps, 2020, p. 231). The common feature across

these discursive accounts is the emphasis on the 'individual subject' and a lack of engagement

with the structural issues in which gender inequality is rooted.

Problematizing meritocracy to uphold or challenge the status quo

While leaders often denied there were systemic gender-based disadvantages in university

recruitment and promotion procedures (e.g. extracts 1-4 above), within their accounts some also

identified scope for potential bias in the system. These responses ranged in the extent to which

the leaders problematized the meritocracy but sought to uphold it. A very small minority of

leaders who problematized the meritocracy did so in a bid to challenge the existing system and

pursue more systemic change. When problematizing the meritocracy the vast majority of leaders

signalled the complexity of merit as a concept but didn't question the meritocracy as a system,

rather minor modifications were sufficient to restore fairness. They highlighted how they

intervened to 'catch biases' through discretionary and often concealed interventions that operated

at the margins of policy. The small minority of leaders who sought more system wide change

were women who were active in the EDI space, either with a formal role in EDI or as someone

with research expertise in the field.

For example, in relation to the first group of leaders who problematized but upheld the

meritocracy, Michael in extract 12 questions the objectivity of promotion criteria and suggests

the need to understand where 'hidden biases might be operating':

12	*Interviewer*	*In the promotion process (.) where are those cha::llenges*
	Michael, M, VC	when you say it'::s based on quantity and quality of publications (.) completed PhD supervisions, winning money and influence of your peers (.) they seem reasonably objective but of course as we said if you've ha::d a succession of maternity leaves (.) or the funders that you're applying to have hidden bias then it (.) may not be easy (.) You could adjust the criteria to be fair to everybody (.5) [We must] understand where the hidden biases might be operating

Whilst this VC suggests they 'could' adjust the criteria to be fairer there is no agreed upon way to 'adjust' for a 'succession of maternity leaves'. The fact that maternity leave impacts women's academic careers is, to some extent, acknowledged, yet universities lack formal policies in relation to how to calculate this impact. University recruitment and promotion boards and research funding agencies offer vague assurances they will 'take into account' maternity leaves (see extract 13 below) but as Klocker and Drozdzewski (2012) provocatively ask 'how many papers is a baby worth?' They point out the difficulties in trying to adjust for the multi-faceted effects that childbearing has on women's academic careers and that there is no 'magic' baby-to-paper ratio. The problem with this 'adjustment' approach when tied up in the discourse of meritocracy can be seen in the next extract:

13	*Interviewer*	*can you describe a bit of the promotion process here (.) How do the diversity goals you mentioned play a role in decision making?*
	Stephen, M, Pro Vice Chancellor (PVC)	yea in terms of promo::tions (.) does diversity come into account (.) we <u>do</u> take (.) into account (.) uh differ:ences of contractual status of individuals (.) so if you know we take into account the fact that people are on point eight contracts or full time or part time we take into account individuals having periods of sickness or maternity leave or whatever changes in their contractual status (.) in the same ways that we would look at someone who has a disability or long term sickness and <u>tr</u>y to gauge what the appropriate benchmark would be for them (.) and we take that quite seriously (.6) I think it's (.) it's rea::lly difficult space because the risk you have is the (.3) I think if you're promoting on merit you should be promoting on merit

The participant in extract 13 begins a series of uncertain start-stop sentences before he settles on equating diversity to 'differences of contractual statuses of individuals'. He outlines that they

'take into account' periods of absence when making promotion decisions but offers no concrete

insight into how they 'gauge…the appropriate benchmark' beyond assuring the interviewer they

take it 'seriously'. He later acknowledges 'it's a really difficult space' returning to the discourse

of meritocracy saying, 'if you're promoting on merit, you should be promoting on merit'. No

consideration is given to the gendered notions of merit in university contexts, where those who

'merit' promotion, are likely those who have been able to commit fully to their careers. Even if

periods of maternity leave are 'taken into account', when women return to work their careers

continue to be impacted since the amount of time that they can dedicate to their careers is

reduced given the bulk of the care and domestic work often falls on them. Here the leader has

problematized aspects of the promotion system, but ultimately upheld the meritocracy.

Some leaders signalled small individual adjustments or 'tweaks' that they made to the

system to restore 'fairness' but were resistant to formalising policies to ensure certain levels of

representation:

14	Interviewer	Do you think that (.) interventions (.) will cause some change of the status quo
	Brian, M, Exec Team	you would <u>ho::pe</u> that as we move on as a society that the whole male white thing will be less of an issue than it has been (.5) here we (.) they have 3 elected [members] (.) who sit on the board and at the moment 2 of those 3 are women (.) fabulous (.) and very good at what they do (.5) I used to cheat a bit because I used to make sure (.) well most of the time and where I could (.) for the meritocracy point (.) that my finance director and HR director were women

In an earlier part of this interview Brian maintained that he 'would hate to think we are making

decisions on something other than merit' but in extract 14 he outlines a situation where he

himself 'cheated a bit' by making decisions based on gender rather than solely on 'merit'. The

interviewer asks about 'interventions' referring to gender quotas for women's representation. He

opposes the use of quotas, suggesting society will 'move on' from 'the whole white male thing'

without any specific systemic or formal changes needed. Yet, he then foregrounds examples of

where he made some ad hoc adjustments to the recruitment process only selecting women for

certain roles. Brian is acknowledging that he needs to 'cheat' to ensure women's representation

yet is simultaneously adamant that the existing system should remain unchanged. The VC in

extract 15 presents an unofficial strategy he uses to ensure his fellow recruitment panel members

aren't swayed by personal biases:

15	Rupert, M, VC	you must make sure that you don't influence selection processes (.) and that's, for me that's the critical piece is (.5) when you say that (.) you need to be scrupulously clear that you're not bringing personal bias into the situation (.) so the only way that I think you can do that is for someone to say you must have group x more than x1 represented in your shortlist. and you must then argue why the marginalised group that you've identified (.) candidate or candidates (.) are not as good as the one you are choosing.
	Interviewer	*So, this is (.) part of the (.) formal process that you implement?*
	Rupert	[head shake] No no (.) I'm much more of the (.4) work in the background and provide incentives for change rather than no you must change

He asserts that the 'only way' to avoid bias, involves having a shortlist with members of

marginalised groups and if a non-marginalised candidate is chosen, the recruitment committee

should argue through the reasons why a marginalized candidate is not 'as good' as the chosen

candidate. He doesn't acknowledge that what is seen as 'good' will likely also be gendered. He

simultaneously notes that he doesn't formalise this as part of the recruitment processes, rather he

is working in the 'background' providing unspecified 'incentives' for change. The unanswered

question here is why he is resistant to formalising this process or forcing change especially

considering he believes it is the 'only way' to avoid bias.

In relation to the second group of leaders a very small minority called for more systemic

change. For example, Joanna, a professor with an EDI role, challenges the dominant discourse on

meritocracy, stating that without systemic change the privileges that white men enjoy will

continue:

16	Joanna, W, professor (EDI role)	It's me and (.) a few others (.) who handle recruitment together and there's one man on the team (.3) has all these ideas for supporting women…his idea is > 'well we <u>have</u> to make sure that we have clear criteria and minimum qualification standards for every position and we need to make sure we hire the best qualified person based on those standards for every interview that we do' < (.) and I said (.3) 'we::ll (.) that's in the::ory really good > but DO YOU REA::LISE THAT WHEN WE DO THAT WE'RE FAR MORE LIKELY TO BE REPRODUCING THE WHITE MALE INDIVIDUAL > who has had more opportunity and privilege to gain those qualifications' (.) If we look at the more holistic picture as opposed to just the criteria (.) and not picking the best but as long as they meet the <u>mini</u>mum standards of what we're looking for (.4) well we need to be a little bit more creative with that

As Joanna signals, her male colleague believes he is acting as an ally and has 'all these ideas for

supporting women' yet his proposals are fully embedded in the 'best person' logic and will

reproduce the 'white male individual'. This is one of the few examples where a participant

actively rejected meritocracy discourse and advocated for 'not picking the best' or rethinking

what being the 'best candidate' means illustrating the important role individuals with EDI

expertise can play in university recruitment and promotion boards. However, several women

leaders also highlighted how visibly challenging the existing system could create difficulties for

their own legitimacy and careers and they had to balance 'wanting to challenge things' whilst

'maintaining credibility' as in extract 17:

17	*Interviewer*	*So because you're a woman (.3) people assume or expect you to be on the equality committee, to be part of the feminist agenda as you put it?*
	Janet, W, Dean	I think you <u>have</u> to be rea::lly careful (.) I've learned over the years about what battles to fight and what aren't worth raising an issue (.) so there are some things it's worth challenging people and sometimes it's not because you're not going to get anywhere (.) and I think once you get labelled as a mad feminist then you'll never achieve anything (.) for me it's about maintaining credibility (.3) if you still want to challenge and do things (.) and <u>if</u> you attack <u>every</u> instance you see of potential

	discrimination you won't get anywhere (.2) you have to have a really careful balance between acceptance and fighting.
Interviewer	*how do you do that (.) find that balance?*
Janet	(.3) try to do it in a humorous way (.) so intervene in a humorous way (.) <u>ob</u>viously not use the word sexist.

In extract 17 this leader sought to evade the disparaging label of 'mad feminist' because once

labelled in this way her authority as leader would be undermined and her ability to make changes

diminished. The discursive trope of 'mad' feminist enacts and reinforces patterns of male

dominance by delegitimising feminist concerns even before the argument begins by making its

costs personal. Janet instead used humour to soften her interventions and didn't directly call out

'sexist' behaviours. As individuals move up through organizational hierarchies where they begin

to have greater potential to effect change, they also experience greater pressures to express the

organizational culture and values, rather than challenge them. Janet might be described as a

'tempered radical', individuals that seek to 'rock the boat and stay in the boat' (Meyerson, 2001).

Discussion

In this paper we problematize the meritocracy's 'spontaneous quality, its transparency, its

'naturalness', its refusal to be made to examine the premises on which it is founded, its resistance

to change or to correction' (Hall, 1979, p. 325-326). While previous studies have established

meritocracy as a politically charged hegemonic discourse (Littler, 2017; Krefting, 2003), in this

study we sought to provide insight into how this discourse is used by leaders to justify gender

inequalities and deny or obscure male privilege. We examine how leaders in HEIs discursively

maintain the 'meritocracy myth' in the face of extensive counterevidence that demonstrates that

women academics do not progress with the same degree of success as men. Using text from

qualitative in-depth interviews, we applied Fairclough's (1992) CDA framework to 'illuminate

ways in which the dominant forces in a society construct versions of reality that favour the interests of those same forces' (McGregor, 2003, p. 2). We identified three discursive means through which leaders maintain and reinforce and on occasion challenge the meritocracy: *invisibilizing gender inequality through gender-neutrality; denying constraints through individualization; and problematizing meritocracy to uphold or challenge the status quo.* The staying power of dominant discourses rests on their ability to go unrecognized and appear 'factual' or 'common-sense'. By highlighting the internal contradictions in how meritocracy talk is used by leaders, unravelling the 'naturalness' of this discourse, and surfacing the discursive interventions that uphold and normalise gender inequalities, our paper challenges and scrutinizes the neoliberal meritocracy, opening a discursive space for a counter-perspective.

The first discursive means used by leaders is *invisibilizing gender inequality through gender-neutrality* whereby efforts to challenge the meritocracy are presented as unnecessary, irrelevant, and even damaging. Previous research has shown that representations of the 'best person' and 'ideal academic' are not gender-neutral and disadvantage women. Our paper contributes by unpacking the ways in which this 'best person' trope permeated with hegemonic masculine ideals alongside 'parables of [women's] progress' (Littler, 2017) where unconstrained women succeed if they work 'hard enough' (i.e. behave and act in (masculine) ways which demonstrate commitment to career progression) is used by leaders to render gender peripheral to discussions. This invisibilizing allows the differences in outcomes for men and women to be treated as irrelevant and enables gender inequalities to reproduce through covert and hidden ways. This builds on Acker's (1990) work that emphasised how the notion of an abstract disembodied worker enables masculine behaviours, practices, and processes to become gender neutral. Acker's work has largely focused on how organizations' structures and processes work

to invisibilize gender. She hints at the importance of exploring the role of leaders noting 'managers' decisions often initiate gender divisions… and organizational practices maintain them' (Acker, 1990, p. 146). One contribution of our paper is precisely that - unravelling and problematising, on a discursive level, how gender neutrality in leader's talk works to invisibilize, maintain and normalise gender inequalities. Our analysis also points to the enduring and pervasive analytical treatment of women and how this differs from men. Women's (lack of) progress is so often intimately connected to the work family narrative, their maternal and other 'bodily attributes' (Acker, 1990), rendering them more at risk of disrupting organisational logics of value and merit, requiring additional support and help for them to successfully navigate their careers. We also see the use of exceptional women as a benchmark for evaluating other women's 'lesser' progress and commitment, which can be divisive and harmful for women collectively. This treatment stands in sharp contrast to the positioning of men as progressing their career organically and remaining disembodied and unencumbered from concerns regarding reproduction capacities and care (Acker, 1990).

We identified a second discursive intervention used by leaders to uphold the meritocracy; *denying constraints through individualization,* where leaders largely rejected the existence of systematic or structural gender inequality within HEIs recruitment and promotion processes. While leaders acknowledged evidence of gender inequality as still present, this was not regarded as a failure of the meritocracy rather they drew on a web of pervasive narratives about women at work, including the 'work-family narrative' (Padavic et al., 2020), 'women opting out' (Williams et al., 2006), and 'women as lacking' (Wittenberg-Cox, 2013) to individualise and normalise the underrepresentation of women in more senior positions. While these narratives have been previously identified, our paper contributes by illustrating how these overlapping narratives

operate as a self-perpetuating frame of reference, working to strengthen the credibility of an argument that denies the structural inequalities faced by women thereby protecting and legitimising existing privileges. In addition, our work contributes by showing how individualization steers us to interpret conditions of marginalisation or disadvantage in isolation, as atypical, rather than as connected and constituting an institutionalised system reinforcing privilege and inequality. Individualization rationalises instances of gender discrimination as localised, unconnected events with the emphasis placed on women to be agentic overcoming barriers, structural constraints and inappropriate behaviours at work while maintaining authenticity. Leaders suggest women academics are underrepresented in senior roles because they *choose* not to progress. Yet simultaneously and paradoxically women academics were also portrayed as in need of reshaping *in order to* progress by aligning with masculine standards of leadership while somehow also retaining an 'authentic' (gender appropriate) style and approach. Our paper therefore contributes by surfacing the inconsistencies within individualization discourse that leave women academics constrained by irresolvable contradictions.

The final discursive means was *problematizing meritocracy to uphold or challenge the status quo*, used within the accounts of some leaders where they problematized the meritocracy but sought to uphold it and a very small number seeking to challenge and potentially change the existing system. Leaders who problematized the meritocracy accepted the potential for inequality or bias but most sought to discursively resolve this tension by signalling individual tweaks and adjustments they made to restore 'fairness' dismissing the need for systemic change. Acting individually to make informal concessions to the underprivileged group without making systemic changes that visibilize and acknowledge inequalities allows the discourse of meritocracy to remain unchallenged. Our paper uncovers the internal contradictions in the talk of leaders where

they both venerated the meritocracy's objective 'best person' ideal whilst simultaneously contravening it, discursively presenting these 'breaches' as restoring meritocracy rather than violating it. Our paper also contributes by the revealing the discursive tactics through which alternative systems such as positive discrimination are rejected. Critiqued through the prism of the meritocracy, leaders discourse makes such alternatives appear oxymoronic, i.e. universities will be forced to recruit people who are not 'as good', reinforcing the meritocracy as the only viable option. Our paper also illustrates albeit to a much lesser extent how discourses of meritocracy are questioned, challenged, and resisted. For example, we show how those in EDI roles can present a discursive challenge to the meritocracy by surfacing and illustrating paradoxes and questioning and countering assumptions before decisions are made. We illustrate how some women leaders walk a tightrope between conformity and rebellion, challenging the status quo through small and incremental changes, these 'tempered radicals' can create opportunities for more radical change through being committed and productive organizational members whilst also sources of resistance, alternative ideas and transformation (Meyerson, 2001).

These three discursive interventions do not work in isolation but rather together to maintain and obscure gender and other social inequalities that support the ongoing competitive functioning of neo liberalised academic institutions. In the marketplace of higher education, leaders are encouraged, like academics, to see themselves as 'responsible, striving, competitive, enterprising subjects' (Ball, 2015, p. 258; Fotaki & Prasad, 2015). A leader's success is largely measured on ensuring the increasing prestige of their university and they are incentivised to ensure their institution rises to the top of the continuously proliferating academic leagues tables. Part of this is ensuring that they recruit the most 'productive' individuals (high status papers,

research grants, etc.) more likely to be men. Yet, universities must be perceived as actively

trying to address inequities or risk impacts on research funding, external marketability,

recruitment etc. Leaders therefore talk about the importance of gender equality and declare their

commitment the creation and adoption of gender equality policies in their institutions. However,

as we show from the three identified discursive interventions by denying structurally ingrained

inequality, and focusing on individual emancipation, equality discourse is essentially 'hijacked',

to performatively create an aura of gender equality without changing the existing system (Smidt,

Pétursdóttir, & Einarsdóttir, 2021). This 'hijacking of the discourse' works to both manage

impressions whilst simultaneously discursively downplaying gender inequality, by suggesting it

has already been dealt with, actions have been taken and appropriate solutions put in place.

While we have extensively problematized the contemporary ideals promulgated by 'the

meritocracy', in terms of implications of our work we also suggest it is possible to re-imagine

what might be considered 'meritorious' in universities. Meritocracy is at its most fundamental a

social system that rewards individuals based on merit, yet merit is not an 'objective' or 'neutral'

term but rather socially constructed and malleable and what is considered 'merit worthy' can

change over time depending on what a society or institution values (Guinier, 2015). Although

existing conceptualisations and measures of what constitutes merit are weighted heavily in

favour of the privileged, standards of merit could be transformed to be more inclusive and reflect

different and diverse values. Universities missions often have a very public quality outlining

their ambition to use research and education to create change and build more progressive

societies, and we follow Guinier (2015) in suggesting a fundamental part of this process of

transformation is developing wider and more inclusive definitions of what is considered

'meritorious' within universities. In relation to the recruitment and promotion of academics this

would involve recognising (rather than denying) inequalities and acknowledging that 'merit' is not gender (or race) blind. We should place individual academics and their achievements firmly within wider structural systems of dis(advantage) and moving away 'the best' being equated solely with publication outputs, research funding etc.

There have been some initiatives that move in this direction, for example, the DORA (Declaration of Research Assessment) which advocates for a different, qualitative assessment of research quality instead of relying on quantitative and gendered metrics (Benschop & van den Brink, 2023). The suggestion is not that we ignore existing markers of quality, but rather there should be critical engagement with what constitutes merit, alongside a more inclusive and diverse understanding of contribution where different types of profiles with diverse trajectories are encouraged and embraced alongside more traditional academic routes. Recruitment and promotion procedures should be continuously reassessed for the degree to which they support the institutions in creating a more inclusive understanding of merit. This would also involve changing what is considered meritorious in how leaders run our academic institutions moving away from 'incentive systems' that predominantly prioritise financial outcomes and towards systems of leadership involves shaping and designing formal organizational initiatives that lead to widespread systemic change, creating faculties and institutions that reflect the diverse society that universities claim to serve and support (Guinier, 2015).

Conclusion

In the paper we show how the ideal of the meritocracy has immense resilience and continues to be mobilised and defended by HEI leaders as an appropriate guiding principle for recruitment and promotion in academia, with the result being that structural gender (and other) inequalities

are insufficiently challenged and inadequately remedied. We illustrate how meritocracy

discourse is used by leaders as a means of discursively legitimating the underrepresentation of

women in senior positions and naturalizing gender disparities as the deserved outcomes of a fair

process. We argue that belief in 'the meritocracy' as it stands will further entrench inequality and

privilege. Yet, in terms of moving beyond critique, we also highlight that what constitutes merit

can change over time and is context dependent, flexible in terms of what any given institution or

organization or society values. If we re-define and re-evaluate what is 'merit worthy' it could

also potentially unseat established privilege, visibilize inequalities and aid the creation of more

inclusive and egalitarian organizations. This would involve the open acknowledgment that

existing understandings of merit have not worked and could only hope to work in a society or

system unlike our own which started with an already high degree of (gender) equality. Academic

institutions could choose to value other characteristics as 'meritorious' beyond the traditional

markers of academic excellence which disadvantage women and incentivize self-interest and

individual accomplishment and competition. We suggest that processes of recruitment and

promotion should position the achievements of academics in the wider context of gender (and

other forms of) structural advantage and disadvantage and universities should prioritize the

creation of schools and faculties that are more reflective of the diverse societies within which

they exist.

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Table 1: Composition of sample: Leadership role and gender

	Women	Men	Totals
	32	21	53
Position			
Vice chancellor	4	9	13
Deputy/Pro Vice Chancellor	4	3	7
Executive Team	4	3	7
Dean	3	2	5
Deputy Dean	3	1	4
Professor	6	2	8
EDI Strategy	5	0	5
Corporate Leader	3	1	4

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Table 2: Iterative stages of CDA analysis

Phase	Analytical goal	Analytical considerations included:
Initial Coding	Open coding of all transcripts to develop familiarity	commonalities; idiosyncrasies; opposing and similar views within and across transcripts; comparisons across position and gender
Textual	*Describing* the linguistic properties of the discourse	lexicalization; metaphors; types of verbs used; active vs passive voice; nominalization; quoted speech (direct/indirect); turn-taking (who controls topic; interruptions; silence); tense used (past, present); pronouns (we, you; choice of first, second, third person)
Discursive practice	*Analyzing* the situational and intertextual context of the discourse with a focus on interactional activity and personal orientations	what is assumed to be known or accepted; who is talked about in the text what are their subject positions; what is left unsaid or implied; the social identities, relationships and positions that are referenced/enacted in the discourse and for what purpose.
Social Analysis	*Explaining* the discourse within economic, political, and environmental conditions	What power relations at the situational, institutional and societal level shape this discourse; what assumptions about culture, social relationships and existing power relations are evident; what hegemonic discourses and ideologies that are drawn on to support arguments.

Table 3: Example of Analytical process

Interviewer	Where does the problem sit then (.) for universities?
Female, deputy vice chancellor	I think in universities < the reason we're not mo::re representative > (.) people have this <u>view</u> (.5) that it's th::e best way (.) it's a meritocracy (.) and the best will come forward and I don't think that's always the case

Early Codes	**Text**	**Discourse practice**	**Social Analysis**
Representation in universities; The merit ideal; Merit imprecise; One best candidate;	Use of both "I" "we" pronouns; hedging; slowed speech; careful selection of words 'I don't think', 'not always'	Alludes to generally accepted assumption that merit should be the goal, although it's "not always the case".	Linkages to hegemonic/ideological ideals of merit
		Assumption that people view universities as meritocracies; it is self-evident	The idea of "one best candidate" is gently challenged, the "best" may be the person with most societal advantage
		Initially uses "I" statement, but then "people" when talking about the "view" that "the best come forward"; "we're" is used when referring to collective "universities"	The idea of universities as realms of unquestionable equality is challenged

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Appendix 1: Transcription Notation adapted from Jefferson

(.)   Short interval
(.2)   Longer interval measured in seconds
[…]   Material omitted
[text]   Clarificatory information
<u>Text</u>   Underline indicates emphasis
Te:::xt   Multiple colons indicate elongated speech
CAPITALS   Increase in volume
<text>   Slowed speaking rate
>text<   Increased speaking rate